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Ryan Farms of Verona Honored as 2007 Boone County Cooperator of the Year

Ryan Farms of Verona has been named the 2007 Boone County Conservation District Cooperator of the Year. The award is part of a state and national program sponsored by the Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts and Tennessee Valley Authority. The program seeks to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to the conservation of our natural resources. Ryan Farms was nominated for the award by Boone County Conservation District and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff.

Walt Ryan has been farming all of his life and bought land near Verona in the early 1960's. His wife, Jan, was a school nurse and worked for the Boone County Health Clinic for several years. They have two children, Todd and Gregg. Todd actively farms with his father and remembers moving to the farm when he was seven years old. Todd said, "All I've ever wanted to do is farm." Greg followed a different career path and now lives in Olive Branch, Mississippi. He shares his family's passion for farming and owns land with his brother. Together the Ryans own 596 acres of land in Boone and Owen counties. They lease another 1,000 acres of corn and soybean ground.

Angus cattle are the mainstay of Ryan Farms. Their herd averages 240 head with the goal of producing one calf per cow each year. Most of the calves are born February through May, are fed over the summer and sold in the fall. Many of the calves are sold to feedlots in Iowa and for the past three years, they have purchased replacement stock from South Dakota.

Ryan Farms was accepted into the USDA Conservation Security Program in 2005. The farming operation had to be located in the Lower Kentucky River watershed to be eligible for this program of the 2002 Federal Farm Bill. The Conservation Security Program is a voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing conservation incentives for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. The program enables producers to make continuing improvements to their operations to protect soil and water resources. Ed L. Thompson Jr., District Conservationist for NRCS notes that the Conservation Security Program "rewards the best and motivates the rest." The Ryans qualified for the program at the Tier II level, which means that they have addressed water and soil quality to meet the minimum treatment requirements and have agreed to address one additional resource need by the end of the contract period. Producers must keep detailed management records for their operations to document that they are meeting the requirements of the program. The Ryans have the largest acreage in Kentucky in the Conservation Security Program - 334 acres of pasture and 261 acres of cropland, including hayland.

Pasture management is one of the main resource needs for their cattle operation. In 2004 the Ryans applied to the Kentucky Soil Erosion and Water Quality Cost Share Program to better utilize their pastureland, improve forage quality, and resolve issues with soil erosion in feeding and watering areas. Through the cost share program, over 1.5 miles of a tributary to the North Fork of Ten Mile Creek, a major stream in Grant County that drains to Eagle Creek and on to the Kentucky River, were protected. A half-mile of fencing was installed to keep cattle from grazing in the woods. Todd said that they harvested timber about 15 years ago so it is important to limit livestock access to keep the forest quality high.

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Walt Ryan and his son, Todd, right, on their family farm near Verona.

A rotational grazing system was implemented by fencing five fields. This system allows each pasture to be grazed for five days and rested for 21 to 35 days between grazing, depending on the time of year. Grazing and clipping heights are managed according to NRCS specifications and livestock are rotated before trails or paths begin to develop. Pastures are reseeded every 3 or 4 years with red and white clover and perennial orchard grass. Their management plan also includes establishment of low- and reduced-endophyte fescue grasses.

The Conservation Security Program also looks at how producers provide livestock with adequate feed, water and shade. To help facilitate their rotational grazing program, the next phase of their project will involve installing pipeline and four more watering tanks to provide sufficient water for the cattle. It is recommended that cattle should not have to walk more than 800 feet to a water source. Any distance over this reduces weight gain and body condition. Cattle are routinely fed a protein supplement.

Nutrient management and vegetative filter strips are important components of a quality livestock operation. In 2007 the Ryans signed a contract for the USDA Federal Farm Bill Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help them install a half-acre heavy use area for winter feeding. A 120-foot animal trail and walkway was also installed. Filter strips around the heavy use area and walkways help reduce nutrient runoff into nearby streams.

Eddie Coyle, a friend and Boone County farmer, raises the corn and beans in partnership with the Ryans. This year they planted 450 acres of corn and 550 acres of soybeans in annual rotation. Production is down considerably for beans this year due to the drought, averaging 6 – 10 bushels per acre when it is normally 55 – 70 bushels per acre. The corn is fed on the farm and soybeans are sold to help generate income for the operation. The Ryans also raise tobacco to help supplement the farm income. In normal years, they plant about 100 acres of tobacco. Although it is mainly a family operation, the Ryans employ year-round help to keep the farm in production.

The Ryans are active members of their community and help with the Verona Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services. Walt has served on the Walton-Verona School board for over 40 years. Todd serves as chairman of the Boone, Campbell and Kenton Farm Services Agency County Committee and is a representative to the Boone County Agriculture Development Council. Todd and his wife of 28-years, Lee Anne, a guidance counselor at R.C. Hinsdale School, have three children: Nicholas, who works at Snappy Tomato Pizza; Lacey, a student at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary studying to become a marriage counselor; and Misty, a junior at Eastern Kentucky

University planning a career in elementary education.

Todd is a graduate of Walton Verona High School and Eastern Kentucky University, where he majored in business management. He said that looking back he could have used a few more classes in agriculture – especially in soils. Todd added, “There is always something to keep learning.... I can’t think of anything I’d rather do and have no thoughts of retiring. I’d rather be planting corn than doing anything else – except maybe combining beans.”

Congratulations to Ryan Farms on being selected as the 2007 Boone County Conservation District Cooperator of the Year.



Todd Ryan, left, and Walt Ryan, right, accept the Cooperator of the Year award from Jim Walton, Chairman of the Boone County Conservation District.